

Article

The Place and Face of the Stranger in Levinas[†]

Jolanta Saldukaitytė

Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Creative Industries, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, 01132 Vilnius, Lithuania; jolanta.saldukaityte@vgtu.lt

† An earlier version of this article, entitled “Stranger as Foreigner from Elsewhere”, was presented at a conference on “Levinas, Displacement, and Repair”, organized by North American Levinas Society at Western Carolina University, NC, USA, on 1 August 2018, and again later, under the title “Face and Place in Levinas”, at a conference on “Problems and Research in Contemporary Phenomenology”, at Vilnius University, Lithuania, on 20 December 2018.

Received: 31 December 2018; Accepted: 17 January 2019; Published: 22 January 2019



Abstract: This essay addresses the topic of place, more specifically it raises the question how and why place is essential for defining the strangeness of the other person. In Levinas’ philosophy the Other as stranger is the one whom I welcome to my home and country, i.e., to my place. This essay takes up three interrelated topics: (1) the general notion of place; (2) the ethical notion of place in Levinas’ philosophy, contrasted with an ontological notion of place. The deepest significance and virtue of place appears not in my dwelling or my compatibility with being but at the site from which the I is able to welcome the Other. Furthermore, the “ownness” of my place is always contested by the stranger as I have no necessity, no ultimate right to be; (3) the strangeness of the Other in Levinas’ philosophy defined not by topology but by vulnerability. To welcome the stranger and give up my place comes from my infinite responsibility for the Other. On the ethical level, the vulnerable face of the Other cannot be objectified and classified.

Keywords: Levinas; other; stranger; face; place; ethics; vulnerability

1. Introduction

For Emmanuel Levinas, the stranger is one of the most “visible” faces of the Other: the Other “has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan” (Levinas 2007, p. 251). But, as I have argued elsewhere,¹ it is important to keep in mind that the figure of the stranger in Levinas’ philosophy is not univocal. The stranger, the foreigner, neither exhausts the meaning of the Other nor can be reduced to it. On the one hand, the stranger is a foreigner, someone who comes from elsewhere. On the other hand, “stranger” refers to the absolute stranger, strangeness is linked to the alterity of the Other as such. In the latter sense, the Other is not only different, foreign but fundamentally alien, radically other.

Despite the irreducible strangeness and “abstractness of the face” as such, the stranger as a foreigner has a privileged status, along with the poor, the widow and the orphan, according to the biblical expression, in Levinas ethics. By raising the question of the Other as the stranger from elsewhere, the foreigner, the importance of place becomes important. The question or status of the stranger as foreigner is tied to the question or status of place.

¹ (Saldukaitytė 2016).

2. Place and the Stranger

Nobody and nothing can be without being in some place. Edward S. Casey suggests that place is so fundamental that “[t]o exist at all as a (material or mental) object or as (an experienced or observed) event is to have a place—to be *implaced*, however minimally or imperfectly or temporally” (Casey 1993, p. 13). One relatively minimal nearly neutral connection to the place is passing through it. If such a place is not owned, if it does not have inhabitants or locals, real encounter with the stranger does not occur. Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Modernity*, referring to Richard Sennett, indicates that the city is such a place where strangers encounter strangers (Bauman 2000, pp. 94–95). We would say that airports are even more like that. Tom Hanks in the rather comical movie “Terminal” (2004) plays an eastern European immigrant who finds himself stranded at JFK airport. During his travels his country has simply disappeared from the map after some political disruption. He has no place to go. His documents are no longer valid. We recall this movie because an airport is an exceptional space: if you are unlucky you might have to spend a night or even two there, but nobody lives at an airport. Nobody is from an airport, nobody belongs to an airport, and everybody there is a passing stranger. It is a non-inhabited place, even if thousands of people are there. In a city you are more likely to encounter the local, whose apartment is around the corner or not so far, who knows streets and can give directions, who feels at “home”. At the airport nobody is at home. Such an encounter of strangers is, borrowing Bauman’s expression, “an event without a past” and “without a future”. There people meet and drift away usually without long-lasting consequences. According to Bauman, such superficial encounters are “mis-meetings.” In various public spaces—bus and train stations, public squares, shopping malls, museums and so on—“[s]trangers meet in a fashion that befits strangers; a meeting of strangers is unlike the meetings of kin, friends, or acquaintances—it is, by comparison, a *mis-meeting*. In the meeting of strangers there is no picking up at the point where the last encounter stopped, no filling in on the interim trials and tribulations or joys and delights, no shared recollections: nothing to fall back on and to go by in the course of the present encounter” (Bauman 2000, p. 95). We may suggest as well that in this sense *stranger* simply means somebody with whom I am not familiar, to whom I have not been introduced. “Do not talk to strangers!”—every child hears this leaving the home and going out to the street. No doubt, we still can talk about the encounter with the Other but in most cases when strangers encounter strangers the encounter lacks the concreteness found in local-foreigner encounters.

Obviously, such casualness fades away when the strangers enter inhabited or owned places. There they are no longer strangers encountering strangers, but citizens meeting one another, or citizens meeting foreigners, natives meeting invaders, hosts welcoming guests, and the like. While the stranger has no place and does not belong here, at the same time the strangeness of the stranger indicates that place itself is no longer homogeneous. As Peter E. Gordon summarizes “to say that something does not ‘belong,’ that its proper place is elsewhere but not here, that its surprising occurrence in native space is a mere accident or, at most, a sign of trespass: a migration *sans-papiers*. A place, a region, a territory: all suggest sites with boundaries, the contrast between inside and outside, between geographies known and unknown. The domestic and the strange, the placed and the displaced” (Gordon 2014, p. 210). Place is inhabited, is not neutral, has orientation, and now it is divided between own and alien. The German phenomenologist Bernard Waldenfels, who has developed a phenomenology of the alien (i.e., stranger as foreigner) indicates that being a foreigner, a stranger as well “signifies that the place that includes me and excludes the other is appropriated at the same moment. It is occupied as *my* point of view, my residence, my habits. The unity of these forms of possession is one’s own body as anchorage in the world” (Waldenfels 1996, p. 115). It is an embodiment of a concrete place, where I am, while others are excluded. So the *here* becomes the locus of this encounter with the Other as stranger.

It is important to keep in mind that the notion of place has undergone several transformations in the history of philosophy. As Waldenfels notes, we can distinguish three main historical space paradigms: *topos*, *spatium* and *Lebenswelt*. Casey in *The Fate of Place* (Casey 1997) gives a detailed historical analysis of place by rethinking space as void, vessel, infinite space, modern space, embodied

space etc. Historical changes precisely concern our world orientation, our dwelling in the world. Even in Aristotelian physics, *topos* means that within the cosmos everything has its own or proper place. With the development of Cartesian or modern physics, *topos* has been changed to *spatium*, which Waldenfels characterizes as “*skeleton-like space which has lost its cosmic flesh*” (Waldenfels 2009, p. 97). All the thick qualities that once belonged to the cosmic *topos* are now abstracted, quantified in terms of measurable extension, applying both to things and to the distances that separate them. Things and human beings are no longer an ensemble, no longer a world, no longer live in and through and penetrate their environment. On the contrary, everything occurs anywhere, interchangeably, located in a homogenous and isotropic space. It is the space of modern science, of coordinate geometry. The phenomenological notion of place as *Lebenswelt*, first introduced by Edmund Husserl, allows speaking about the place as not simply filled up or divided but as inhabited. The “life-world” is inhabited by human beings, all of them bodily, dwelling and moving around a world. By approaching different cultures a new dimension of meaning is established: own and alien. For the later Husserl, even “life-world” seems too abstract, so he introduces the terms “home-world” (*Heimwelt*), which unfolds by becoming familiar, and “alien world” (*Fremdwelt*), which remains unfamiliar. The beyond, the alien world is not only the possibility for me to leave my home world but as well is the place from where the Other as stranger comes. The stranger as foreigner comes from his own place, elsewhere, and never really can fully appropriate a place which is not his.

3. Place and the Chosen Home

In Levinas’ philosophy this embodiment in a concrete place is from the very beginning seen as problematic. Levinas is always quite critical of attachment to place, seeing it as too earthy, as pagan, a source of creating idols. No doubt in many cases he is confronting Martin Heidegger, who, for example, in his notoriously famous *Der Spiegel* interview, indicates that “according to our human experience and history, everything essential and of great magnitude has arisen only out of the fact that man had a home and was rooted in a tradition” (Heidegger 1981, p. 57). Alluding to certain obvious Nazi “blood and land” resonances, for Levinas, on other hand, quite the opposite evaluation is the case:

“an existence which takes itself to be natural, for whom its place in the sun, its ground, its site, orient all signification—a pagan existing. Being directs it building and cultivating, in the midst of a familiar landscape, on a maternal earth. Anonymous, neuter, it directs it, ethically indifferent, as a heroic freedom, foreign to all guilt with regard to the other. Indeed this earth-maternity determines the whole Western civilization of property, exploitation, political tyranny, and war” (Levinas 1987, pp. 52–53).

Here we may recall differences between Ulysses’ and Abraham’s journeys: while Ulysses after a long journey and a wide variety of adventures returns to Ithaca, “Abraham leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land” (Levinas 1986, p. 348). Levinas sees that “[p]hilosophy’s itinerary still follows the path of Ulysses whose adventure in the world was but a return to his native island—complacency of the Same, misunderstanding of the Other” (Levinas 2003, p. 26). The I, the subject itself for Levinas is uprooted, but uprooted and unhomely not, as in Heidegger, because of forgetfulness of being, or modern technological alienation, no longer dwelling in the opening, but rather because its openness to the face invokes a surplus, an infinity. Levinasian alterity, which is the true adventure, “a fine risk,” without coming back. Levinas turns to “elsewhere” and “otherwise” of the Other. “This concern for the Other remains utopian in the sense that it is always ‘out of place’ (*u-topos*) in this world, always other than the ‘ways of the world’” (Levinas and Kearney 1986, p. 32). Heidegger too, sees that “*From an existential-ontological point of view, the “not-at-home” must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon*” (Heidegger 2008, p. 234). The authentic Dasein finds itself uncanny, homeless in the world, bearing witness to the oblivion of being. In the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger indicates that the word “homeland” is thought in terms of the history of being but not patriotically or nationalistically: “The essence of the homeland, however, is also mentioned with the intention

of thinking the homelessness of contemporary human beings from the essence of being's history" (Heidegger 1993, p. 241). However, despite being reduced simply to nationalistic attachment to land, we still hear the call to return home, to a homeland, a dwelling in the openness of being, an openness to being's initiative. We recognize a longing to come back, a settling sameness, such as one finds in all Western philosophy, under various other names: "In the face of the essential homelessness of human beings, the approaching destiny of the human being reveals itself to thought on the history of being in this, that the human being find his way into the truth of being and set out on this find" (Heidegger 1993, p. 244).² Moreover, can we really forget that Heidegger in the 1930s and 1940s was able to find his way back into "the truth of being" through loyalty to Hitler and—in however rarified a language—to the horrors of Nazi Germany. We might argue that the place in Heidegger does not indicate a specific place, but no doubt even granting this it always refers to the ontological significance of the place.

While describing Heidegger's philosophy, Levinas says: "Whatever the case may be, he has a very great sense for everything that is part of the landscape; not the artistic landscape, but the place in which man is enrooted. It is absolutely not a philosophy of the emigre! I would even say that it is not a philosophy of the emigrant. To me, being a migrant is not being a nomad. Nothing is more enrooted than the nomad. But he or she who emigrates is fully human: the migration of man does not destroy, does not demolish the meaning of being" (Levinas 1998, p. 117). To be human is to be open for the unknown, for the Other, infinity, to take the risk of the unknown,³ which is quite opposite than to seek identity, stability, safety. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas criticizes ontology as first philosophy because it leans toward totality and sameness:

"A philosophy of power, ontology is, as first philosophy which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice. Even though it opposes the technological passion issued forth from the forgetting of Being hidden by existents, Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny. Tyranny is not the pure and simple extension of technology to reified men. Its origin lies back in the pagan 'moods,' in the enrootedness in the earth, in the adoration that enslaved men can devote to their masters. Being before the existent, ontology before metaphysics, is freedom (be it the freedom of theory) before justice. It is a movement within the same before obligation to the other" (Levinas 2007, pp. 46–47).

"Enrootedness in the earth" rather than giving strength signifies the weakness and unjustified superiority as well as violence towards others. "One's implantation in a landscape, one's attachment to Place, without which the universe would become insignificant and would hardly exist, is the very splitting of humanity into natives and strangers" (Levinas 1990, p. 232). We may add that this splitting comes from objectifying features and in this sense neither native nor stranger is encountered as other but a having "a right to this place" or not.

Against the idea of homeland or given place, Levinas poses the chosen place. Unlike Heidegger, for Levinas worldliness begins not as being-in but as at home—but we must be careful not to misunderstand what Levinas means by this. In *Totality and Infinity*, discussing the meaning of home and dwelling, Levinas shows that the home is not like any other place: "The chosen home is the very opposite of a root. It indicates a disengagement, a wandering which has made it possible, which is not a less with respect to installation, but the surplus of the relationship with the Other, metaphysics" (Levinas 2007, p. 172). The description of home in *Totality and Infinity* first of all appears at the level of enjoyment and representation. In other words, habituation, dwelling, together with nourishment,

² Coming "home" to the nearness of being especially is invoked in the text on Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister" (Heidegger 1996).

³ In fact, Levinas—and his wife—migrated from Lithuania to France which does not necessarily illustrate or justify his philosophy but nonetheless does refer to a proximity of life and thought.

shows how the subject escapes the anonymity of *il y a* and separates from the neuter. Although, as later becomes clear, this escape is only partial and still selfish, the home, habitation is the possibility to withdraw from the insecurity and instability of the nature, from pagan, mythical gods of nature, from elements and to become an independent subject:

“With the dwelling the separated being breaks with natural existence, steeped in a medium where its enjoyment, without security, on edge, was being inverted into care. Circulating between visibility and invisibility, one is always bound for the interior of which one’s home, one’s corner, one’s tent, or one’s cave is the vestibule. The primordial function of the home does not consist in orienting being by the architecture of the building and in discovering a site, but in breaking the plenum of the element, in opening in it the Utopia in which the ‘I’ recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself” (Levinas 2007, p. 156).

Home is not a given but rather an effort. It is already a victory against anonymity and the neuter. The alterity of the world is, by means of the home and the dwelling, turned into the possibility of self-identification. “To exist henceforth means to dwell. To dwell is not the simple fact of the anonymous reality of a being cast into existence as a stone one casts behind oneself; it is a recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome” (Levinas 2007, p. 156). So home is the condition or possibility for recollection and interiority. Therefore, against Heidegger, “[t]he doctrine that interprets the *world* as a horizon from which things are presented as implements, the equipment of an existence concerned for its being, fails to recognize the being established at the threshold of an interiority the dwelling makes possible” (Levinas 2007, p. 163). The sense of the world is made up originally neither of objects or tools but as dwelling, the possibility of interiority.

Drawing his own parallel between home and tool, Levinas indicates that “home would serve for habitation as the hammer for the driving in of a nail or the pen for writing” (Levinas 2007, p. 152). Therefore, home is “extraterritorial”, meaning that it is excluded from territorial jurisdiction: it can also be called a private sphere or, in Levinas’s terminology in *Totality and Infinity*, dwelling, a “feminine presence”—which in no way can simply be reduced to female or described by a male-female distinction. “[T]he interiority of the home is made of extraterritoriality in the midst of the elements of enjoyment with which life is nourished. This extraterritoriality has a positive side. It is produced in the gentleness [douceur] or the warmth of intimacy, which is not a subjective state of mind, but an event in the oecumena of being—a delightful ‘lapse’ of the ontological order” (Levinas 2007, p. 150). Here, then, is an alternative to the world grasped as object-relations or an instrumental complex; already it stands in relation to human alterity, a gentleness.

Another aspect of the home is its character as shelter. It guarantees safety, a modicum of security, gives a possibility of recollection and recreation. However, Levinas does not limit his notion of home to this most common and natural function. Home as a shelter is not a goal as such but a condition for all human activity, a launching point, as it were, for other relations with the world.

“The privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement. The recollection necessary for nature to be able to be represented and worked over, for it to first take form as a world, is accomplished as the home. Man abides in the world as having come to it from a private domain, from being at home with himself, to which at each moment he can retire. He does not come to it from an intersideral space where he would already be in possession of himself and from which at each moment he would have to recommence a perilous landing. But he does not find himself brutally cast forth and forsaken in the world. Simultaneously without and within, he goes forth outside from an inwardness [intimite]. Yet this inwardness opens up in a home which is situated in that outside—for the home, as a building, belongs to a world of objects” (Levinas 2007, p. 152).

It is not only the condition to close in upon itself but opens the possibility for activity:

“Dwelling is the very mode of *maintaining oneself* [*se tenir*], not as the famous serpent grasping itself by biting onto its tail, but as the body that, on the earth exterior to it, holds *itself* up [*se tient*] and *can*. The ‘at home’ [Le ‘chez soi’] is not a container but a site where I *can*, where, dependent on a reality that is other, I am, despite this dependence or thanks to it, free. It is enough to walk, to *do* [*faire*], in order to grasp anything, to take. In a sense everything is in the site, in the last analysis everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I but reckon them, calculate the intermediaries or the means” (Levinas 2007, p. 37).

The metaphysical relation, relation with the Other, here is not yet introduced, or rather not yet fully introduced. Metaphysical desire for Levinas is directed “elsewhere”, to the “otherwise”, which is to say, to the other person. As Levinas reminds, “in the history of thought it appears as a movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us, whatever be the yet unknown lands that bound it or that it hides from view, from an “at home” [*chez soi*] which we inhabit, toward an alien ‘outside-of-oneself’ [*hors-de-soi*], toward a yonder. The term of this movement, the elsewhere or the Other, is called other in an eminent sense. No journey, no change of climate or of scenery could satisfy the desire bent toward it” (Levinas 2007, p. 33). So home, *at home with oneself* here appears as the condition not only for the activity of a self-enclosed subject but for the metaphysical desire which “does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves” (Levinas 2007, pp. 33–34). In the Preface of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas already notes: “This book will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality; in it the idea of infinity is consummated” (Levinas 2007, p. 27).

Home as a chosen place opens the possibility of having more than one home⁴ (although only living in one, of course, at any one moment). Home as the place of dwelling is not limited to the literal notion of a house, apartment, tent or castle and the like. It can be a seat or a spot which one takes, one’s own at that time and not someone else’s. No doubt, we may experience the different intensity of different places—the seat in a waiting room, in an airplane, the spot in a waiting line, in a parking lot or a site where we build a house or in a housing courtyard or the country; there is always implicated the possibility that by taking my place I take the place from the Other. Regarding Heidegger’s alternative account, Levinas points out, “Dasein never wonders whether, by being *da*, ‘there’, it’s taking somebody else’s place!” (Levinas 1991, p. 18). Taking a position in being, to be involved with the world (the spatiality of Dasein, the spatiality of ready-to-hand) is necessary but not sufficient. Levinas famously cites Pascal at the preface of *Otherwise than Being* “That is my place in the sun”. “That is how the usurpation of the whole world began”. Levinas clearly indicates the danger of taking a place (Levinas 2008, p. viii). To exist means to take a place “under the sun”. Taking a place for Levinas is seen not as an “ontological privileging of ‘the right to exist’” (Levinas and Kearney 1986, p. 24) but as an ethical situation that as such raises questions: “it is not only the question ‘Is my life righteous?’ but rather, ‘Is it righteous to be?’” (Levinas 2001, p. 163). Levinas question is not that of *conatus essendi*, the “effort of being”, not the question what is the ground of my being or why there is something rather than nothing, but do I not displace the Other, do I not kill just by being? “[I]s not my place in being, the *Da* of my *Dasein*, already a usurpation, already a violence in respect of the other?” (Levinas 2001, p. 225).

Taking a place is only one dimension of the meaning of place for Levinas. The place is also the possibility for hospitality. The possibility of opening the door for the Other—literality and figuratively—for Levinas is our real—or rather our “best”—relation with place. From this it follows that home is essential not simply as shelter, enclosure, but even more as the possibility to be open:

⁴ For example, in the Lithuanian language (which Levinas knew) “house”—“*namas*” is singular while “home”—“*namai*” is always plural. For drawing my attention to this I am grateful to prof. Saulius Geniušas (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) at a conference on “Problems and Research in Contemporary Phenomenology”, Vilnius, Lithuania, 20 December 2018.

“The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows” (Levinas 2007, p. 173). This is for Levinas the proximity to the Other which is not measured by geometrical space. It is sensibility, concrete response: “The obligation aroused by the proximity of the neighbor is not to the measure of the images he gives me; it concerns me before or otherwise” (Levinas 1989, p. 89). The own-alien place in Levinas therefore is not simply heteronomy in the world, not reducible to “life-world”—spatial terms are used nonspatially

Place is not where I can selfishly appropriate or freely “let be,” but the place where I can welcome the stranger. The real meaning of place comes not only from being a dwelling site but a welcoming site. In this sense we see the parallel with becoming a subject: to escape from anonymity is not enough. Real subjectivity is evoked by the Other, i.e., in responsibility. Welcoming the Other, hospitality is one of these instances: “understanding the meaning of the human—the very dis-inter-estedness of their being—does not begin by thinking of the care men take of the places where they want to be-in-order-to-be. I am thinking above all of the *for-the-other* in them, in which, in the adventure of a possible holiness, the human interrupts the pure obstinacy of being and its wars” (Levinas 1998, p. 231). It is not my being-at-home that comes first, that has primacy in the moral sense, but the Other’s. It is from my home that I can concretely welcome the Other. Dwelling thus sets up an inside and an outside, interiority and exteriority. Therefore, place is not fundamentally ontological but ethical as “no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home. Recollection in a home open to the Other—hospitality—is the concrete and initial fact of human recollection and separation; it coincides with the Desire for the Other absolutely transcendent” (Levinas 2007, p. 172). So place is not only the place where I can return but the place where I can greet and welcome the Other. And as it is not only my home but my country as well where I am able to welcome the stranger. In this sense dividing the world into a home world and an alien world is built on hospitality and allows it, opening up grounds for an ethics of dwelling with others in the world. “To shelter the other in one’s own land or home, to tolerate the presence of the landless and homeless on the “ancestral soil,” so jealously, so meanly loved-is that the criterion of humanness? Unquestionably so” (Levinas 1994b, p. 98). The home even if considered a possession is different from movable good which we collect, keep or exchange. For home is an essential part of hospitality, for a place only can be called home if there is both dwelling and hospitality: “This refers us to its essential interiority, and to the inhabitant that inhabits it before every inhabitant, the welcoming one par excellence, welcome in itself” (Levinas 2007, p. 157). I, the one who is welcoming the stranger, feels safe and secure in his own home and in his country, or at least relatively safer and more secure. The stranger, who is out of place, is the one who disturbs me. As we have mentioned above, place is not anonymous, not pre-given, but is inhabited, a created place. The encounter with the stranger thus occurs not in an anonymous nobody’s place, a “no man’s land,” (as airport), not in geometrical space, but at home. The stranger is *here* but has no place; he is *atopos*. The stranger who appears in my site questions my very right to be at my place. The request for hospitality, and even more the offering of hospitality to strangers are common to all cultures—from Greek Zeus Xenios to the contemporary policies of the European Union.

4. The Face of the Stranger from Elsewhere

The figure of the foreigner, the one who comes from another country, another place, often signifies *stranger as such*. We find various images of such strangers in philosophy, arts and literature: he is an Eleatic Stranger, he stands at the door of Electra, he is French Algerian Meursault etc. The place of origin, the distant place from where the foreigner comes, by itself is the most distinctive aspect contributing to the perceived foreignness of the stranger. The foreigner is not from this community, not from this town, not from this country. He comes from elsewhere and he does not belong to this place. As Casey suggests, the stranger is not just different, giving rise perhaps to curiosity, but “someone who is deeply alien to everything we have experienced and known, so much so that such a person is not merely foreign but truly ‘strange,’ so odd and incongruous as to upset any usual expectations we might have, even to threaten our personal integrity at some basic level” (Casey 2011,

p. 47). *Topos*, or more precisely the *distant place* from where the stranger comes, for Waldenfels is the most distinctive and the most important feature of strangeness and of otherness as such. As he underlines, we should ask not who or what is the stranger, but “Where is the stranger from?” His alien passport perhaps in an unknown script, his incomprehensible speech, the color of his skin or hair, his unfamiliar mannerisms, his peculiar clothes and customs, all announce that he is a stranger, not one of us, we who are from here, we who live here already and know each other and are familiar with each other’s ways. The question *who* or *what* is the stranger leads us to distinguish different categories of strangers. We might think of the stranger in terms of difference and similarity, that he is weird, peculiar, unknown. Such strangeness might be a function of history (different in time) or culture (different in space), or socio-anthropological (different ways of life). According to Waldenfels, such a difference or heteronomy as these “presupposes a certain *topology* that prevents the question *what?* and *who?* from being detached from the question *where?* as the locus of the questioning itself” (Waldenfels 1996, p. 116). Waldenfels tries to convince us that we should not chase after absolute strangeness as the infinite or absolute Other, as in Levinas, which goes beyond phenomenology and does not appear as a phenomenon. Sure enough, phenomenology can only describe what appears. But phenomenology together with an epistemological, even empirical approach does not enable us to meet the Other in Levinas’s sense. Levinas would object. Even if in some cases he has in mind the Other as stranger, foreigner, he does not reduce the Other simply to topology. Topology, after all, is another way to reduce the Other to an object, *to kill*. As I have said above, the stranger does not exhaust the meaning of the Other. But even more, the stranger as the foreigner from elsewhere, i.e., topology, does not exhaust the meaning of the stranger.

In the secondary literature the question of who is the Levinasian other and how its alterity relates to the stranger frequently is raised. There have been accusations—by Judith Butler, Howard Caygill, Slavoj Žižek, Benda Hofmeyr, Catriona Hanley, John Drabinski, David Campbell, and others, that Levinas is merely Eurocentric or, worse, racist and colonialist. Such words often seem cheap, in several senses. Not simply that these critics have not begun to think ethics as deeply as does Levinas. Nor to go into details, we have in mind also how commentators have fixated upon certain phrases, all too often ripped from their proper context, such as “Palestinian non-Other” (Levinas 1989, pp. 289–97), “yellow Perl” (Levinas 2004, p. 108), “all the exotic—is dance” (Levinas 1991, p. 18), and used them to paint Levinas, of all people, as unethical, unjust, colonialist, etc. Who better to accuse of the unethical than someone dedicated to ethics? There is no question, too, as has been shown in several other secondary articles (especially by Oona Eisenstadt and Claire Elise Katz (Eisenstadt and Katz 2016) and Michael L. Morgan (Morgan 2016)) that these commentators have indeed taken Levinas’s words and expressions out of context or have given them significations Levinas did not. My interest here is not to refute each of these accusations; other scholars have done this quite well, though such “criticisms” seem irrepressibly to arise again hydra-headed. Rather, I want to look at the heart of the accusation, namely, that Levinas’s thought implies the “*opposition between the alterity of transcendence and the alterity of strangers*” (Hofmeyr 2016, p. 187), in other words, that, as they say, Levinas exalts one kind of other above other kinds of others. For instance, these critics have claimed that “In fact, for him, the alterity of transcendence is sharply differentiated from the alterity of strangers—those strangers in need of ‘translation’; as in alterity ‘we can find an enemy’ it means that the ‘strangers’ bear this threatening potential” (Hofmeyr 2016, p. 185). Moreover, “Levinas’s conception of alterity is of a completely different order than the alterity of Strangers—i.e., those others of non-Western cultures that belong to the mundane historical world, revealed in being horizontally” (Hofmeyr 2016, p. 174). In this sense the Other is seen as reduced to a merely ontological or defined by a socio-cultural context. Or, in other words, stranger is only encounter in some ontological or epistemological “form”. By viewing and measuring different features we are interested only in the plastic image of the Other.

For Levinas, however, the alterity of the Other (at the face-to-face) cannot be reduced to a plastic image and is not encountered, or first encountered by means of representations. The Other is not an object, is not encountered as information, a set of attributes, say, or distinguishing features. As long

as we observe the Other's body, the shape of his or her nose, the color of their eyes, the wrinkles on the forehead, the pimple on their chin, we take the Other as an object. Like any other object, the face as plastic image conforms to representation, which always "comes after the event," thereby losing the directness of the face, its impinging immediacy. As long as diversity and differences result from different qualities, then, they are antecedent to Otherness, absolute alterity. To encounter the Other as a face is to encounter alterity beyond cultural or social context: "The nudity of a face is a bareness without any cultural ornament, an absolute, a detachment from its form in the midst of the production of its form" (Levinas 1987, p. 96) is to refuse to reduce him or her into any category, kind, specie, commonality. "A face enters into our world from an absolutely foreign sphere," Levinas writes, "that is, precisely from an absolute, that which in fact is the very name for ultimate strangeness" (Levinas 1987, p. 96). To be sure, the other person has all the attributes of any material being; this is not at issue. But they—such attributes and their attribution—are not the only issue, that is the issue.

Nonetheless it is in this sense, that these critics want to suggest that Levinas is ignoring all differences and talking only about some sort of anonymous face of the Other, as has been proposed, for example, by Jean Luc Marion, who claims that "it appears as 'no person,' as no individual, as no so-and-so, it does not appear, to sum up, in person, nor as a person. With the Other, no person appears yet" (Marion 2005, p. 108). The face of the Other is extraterritorial and in this sense the face is "abstract" in the precise sense of breaking from its context. Levinas has been eagerly criticized for being too abstract, that he loses the site of concreteness, and for this reason he ignores diversity and refuses to see concrete difference in different faces. But what these critics fail to realize or choose to ignore is that to break from the context is not to fall back into theology or speculative metaphysics. Rather, it is to break from facelessness, masks, stereotypes, categories, enumerations, from a Kafkaesque administrative and bureaucratic mentality. Such a break, to which Levinas points, does not at all compromise singularity or concreteness. Indeed, perhaps nothing is more singular or more concrete, contrary to Levinas's critics, than the face, the face encountered not by knowing but in obligation, in moral responsibility. The other person is the one who faces, in flesh and blood, other not simply because of peculiar characteristics, which all material beings, and not only fingerprints or snowflakes, say, have, or other simply because of another lifestyle, or because the Other happens to be someone exotic and from an alien place. These differences do not go away, of course, not at all, but they are not ultimately what is decisive about alterity. Making them so, let us not fail to note, is precisely the mark of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and the like, though not necessarily. What is most important and what these critics seem oblivious to—and this was not considered in the studies of Waldenfels either—is the absoluteness of the Other's upsurge, the condition, too, of the stranger. The differences of diversity and particularity of the stranger/other are not dismissed in Levinas's philosophy but are rather approached from a different, indeed a higher, more worthy angle.

The overall problem with these accusations is that they do not make a distinction between the ethical and the political, as is made clear by Richard A. Cohen and Michael Morgan.⁵ Even though a

⁵ "This confusion involves failing to distinguish what we might call the ethical other from the political other. It is a distinction that corresponds to the more general distinction between the face-to-face, as an underlying structural feature of all our second-person relations, and the various features and the relationships that constitute our everyday relations with others. The latter are diverse and general; they are capable of being understood, named, classified, compared, and more. The former is the primordial second-person relatedness that is wholly constituted by the self's responsibility to and for each and every other person. When Levinas says that we are responsible for the everyone, he means this primordial sense of responsibility, and in this sense everyone is an ethical other for everyone else. At the everyday level. In the context of our complex network of interpersonal, social, and political relationships, our status as political others is a matter of degree. We are closer or more distant, more intimate or less, more closely associated with some than with others. < . . . > As Levinas puts it, using the word "neighbor" for the other with whom we have a face-to-face relation and to whom and for whom each is responsible, one is a neighbor no matter where one is kin or one is an enemy. But at everyday level < . . . > others come in different degrees and kinds. < . . . > In short, one we have a plurality of persons and a vast network of responsibilities, we have to identify, classify, organize, compare, and evaluate the responsibilities of the others and our own. Only at this level will it turn out, based on our calculations and discriminations, who we judge is right and who wrong, who just and who unjust" (Morgan 2016, p. 285).

central image of the stranger does refer us to other lands and countries, what is most important is not the place the Other comes from, nor even the description of his destitution, but rather the Other's *suffering* from this destitution. The stranger is the stranger not only because he has no home and is foreign, comes from elsewhere, (which would be "objective facts") but because these "facts" heighten the Other's *vulnerability*. "Misery and poverty are not properties of the Other, but the modes of his or her appearing to me, way of concerning me, and mode of proximity" (Levinas 1993, p. 18). These differences, then, which refer to exceptional circumstances have a valence, indicate an exceptional vulnerability: "In relation to the other, it is because he is alien that he is incumbent on me" (Levinas 1991, p. 18). What counts most directly is not our thematizations of the Other's suffering but the appeal, the solicitation, the provocation aroused by it. "He has no other place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the cold and the heat of the seasons. To be reduced to having recourse to me is the homelessness or strangeness of the neighbor" (Levinas 1998, p. 91) writes Levinas in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. This, as Robert Bernasconi indicates, means "not only that the Other makes a claim on me irrespective of his or her nationality but also that the Other has the claim on me that the nationless, the refugees, and the homeless have" (Bernasconi 1995, p. 81). Ultimately, then, the alterity of the stranger is an ethical event, a solicitation, putting the self in question, arousing moral responsibility. The stranger *is* the Other despite any circumstance, but we cannot allow this to blind us to the further claim that certain particular circumstances underline the vulnerability of the Other, for instance, that the Other is a stranger. Thus Levinas' powerful claim: "To think of men's hunger is the first function of politics" (Levinas 1994a, p. 18). In each concrete situation, we have to identify and indicate the concrete aid that is called for: "Morality without justice, on the hand, is mere sentimentality and affectation, private charity, personal complacency and satisfaction, an escape to one's private garden. It ignores the world, ignores the stranger, the distant ones, those whose cries are not heard" (Cohen 2014, p. 25).

So here we ask not who or what the Other is, nor from where does the stranger come, but more radically how do I encounter the stranger. That how is the ethical: the stranger is the vulnerable one, the sufferer, to whose aid I must come. The Other as such obligates me. Such an approach does not eliminate the particularity of the stranger, but particularity is not a matter of descriptive features. Rather it calls forth and underlines specific needs: hunger, shelter, friendship, and all that I can do to responsibly serve the Other. In other words, even though the face is not a plastic image and radical alterity cannot be reduced to materiality, still the concrete imperatives of face demand that I meet the Other as belonging to some race, some gender, some age, some country and so on. Indeed, nothing is more concrete. In the specificity of the face, or more broadly of the body, of the other person entire, inscribed in a particular cultural-social context, the I encounters—in responsiveness—the otherness of the Other irreducible to the same. The face of the stranger is vulnerable, not reducible to a context, to her place. It is extraterritorial. The face, the stranger is extraterritorial" as even if coming from elsewhere this elsewhere is not captured or reduced to a specific location but refers from the first to a "height" in an ethical sense, an obligation. In this way the alterity and uniqueness of the other person are extra-territorial per se.

In latter writings Levinas is even clearer that my place, my home and my country are not only sites of hospitality but that they can always be contested by a stranger. "One has to respond to one's right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one's fear for the Other. My being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun', my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing⁶?" (Levinas 1989, p. 82). The crime is not only murder, one person stabbing, beating, and otherwise

⁶ In a very detailed and clear study, Roger Burggraeve unwraps many of the possible ways we might be killing the other in Levinasian sense (Burggraeve 1999).

terminating the life of the Other, because there are many ways—indirect as well as direct—to kill Other. So when Levinas asks, at the cost of whom are our daily meals assured? (Levinas 2001, p. 225) he is concerned that we are at all times at the edge of the possibility of committing a crime: “This does not mean simply that you are not to go around firing a gun all the time. It refers, rather, to the fact that, in the course of your life, in different ways, you kill someone. For example, when we sit down at the table in the morning and drink coffee, we kill an Ethiopian who doesn’t have any coffee” (Levinas 1988, p. 173). My place, my needs, my very being is always under question and to more I recognize this, the more I respond to the Other, “the more I am just the more guilty I am” (Levinas 2007, p. 244).

So, on one hand, place for Levinas carries different meanings. It is the extraterritorial private site of dwelling, and the possibility of welcome and hospitality for the Other which is an ethical virtue of the place. At the same time, I always appears not only as a settler but as a usurper by very possibility of being and taking a place, I am therefore always guilty and always prodded to more responsibility. On other hand, the place, topology lets us recognize and identify who or what is the stranger but does not exhaust her meaning. Ontological and epistemological descriptions become important in making political decisions (which is not the topic of the present essay), but at an originary ethical level the significance of place highlights the vulnerability of the stranger.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: Some of this material was encouraged as a result of participation in the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Seminar for College and University Teachers: “Emmanuel Levinas on Morality, Justice, and the Political” held at SUNY at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY, USA, 17–21 July 2017, directed by Richard A. Cohen and James McLachlan. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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